

Fish traps and tree guards

By Michael Mackenzie from Brewarrina , NSW

Thursday, 17/04/2008

When Mibby Clarke was only four years old, he moved from his hometown of Walgett in western NSW to live with his grandmother in West Brewarrina or as locals refer to it, 'Dodge City.'

Now in his forties Mibby shows visitors a part of the Barwon Darling River that has sustained his people, and the people of several other tribes for thousands of years.

"Basically, whenever we had the chance and the fish were running in the river, every summer holiday and even in the wintertime, we'd come to the weir. All we'd come with is a box of matches, no money. Water? That's here to drink. Feed? Crayfish, yellow belly, whatever."

Just across the road from the Tourist Information service in this remote community are the ancient stone fish traps that were the region's focal point for food gathering, ceremony and inter-tribal marriage long before Egypt's pyramids rose from the desert sands.

Mibby Clarke refers us to our paper map: "Those are the number of tribes that used to be here. Each tribe had their own traps. Small traps for the small ones and the large tribes had the bigger ones. Because Brewarrina was basically a meeting place for a lot of tribes."

We make our way through the dust, weeds and broken glass to stand on the levee overlooking the river and the flat country beyond. Below and to the right, water slides over the weir built in the 1960s, past the gimlet eyes of the herons and egrets fishing for yellow belly, and through the cunning funnels of rock placed against the flow.

If this extraordinary site was anywhere near a capital city, Mibby Clarke would be one of many guides taking hundreds of tourists daily on an interactive tour, with extensive facilities to immerse us in the experience. But this is Brewarrina, officially the most under privileged shire in the state, and as we walk towards the ochre cliffs where traditional dancers still scrape colour from the walls, we pass the underground Cultural Museum whose doors have been closed for years. Lack of funding, Mibby says. Maybe money will be found this year.

During the height of the drought, when the farmers and townspeople of Bourke scrimped and saved their dwindling supplies of water from the Darling, 100 kms upstream Brewarrina was barely on stage 1 restrictions. The old people picked their site for the fish traps well, Mibby says, because even though they were built during drought, this part of the system has deep water holes that can weather any dry spell.

Just like those old days, Brewarrina's children still gather in the shallows to take what they can eat or sell. Fingers still sidle under rocks to feel for yellow belly and cod whilst throwing the European carp onto the rocks to die like the scourge it is.

Tibby points to a series of formations further downstream where there's more contemporary attempts to make a fish trap. "With the help of Biami, our spirit, this is what we have here today."

But in this rushing water it's not stone or nylon line that's the weapon of choice. It's the circular tree guard, plunged into the torrent, with a quick hand down the centre. The heron and egrets stand sentinel. They watch and they wait.

